

Golden Harvest

What happens to a tiny community when a hundred thousand dollars suddenly pours into the pockets of its residents – all of it new money? The story of boom time in Duxbury in 1954 and 1955, when residents found gold – in the form of bay scallops – in their mud flats, gave the *Clipper* an exciting story that attracted national interest.

Duxbury shellfish is world-famed. At the turn of the century, Duxbury clams were mentioned in cookbooks, and only their Ipswich cousins deserved to be compared with them. Epicures in remote places used to send to Duxbury for seed clams. By 1914, however, the supply of Duxbury clams had dwindled, and diggers were lucky to get half a dozen buckets from the mud flats between tides. The town's clam garden, planted in 1914, revived the industry.

In 1936, its peak year of production, Duxbury Bay was tapped for 177,000 bushels of clams that sold at \$1.50 a bushel. By 1950, the same area gave up only 170 bushels, which went for as high as \$5 a bushel. The clamming industry faded because of a change in the configuration of the coastline, water pollution, decline in the growth of eel grass and as a result of such predators as crabs and snails.

Duxbury historians who have dug into the clam story say clam chowder originated in Duxbury. Ruth Alden Bass, an early settler, was walking along the beach looking for driftwood when she saw pigs rooting for clams and eating them with relish (not Worcestershire, of course). Later, when her family faced famine while scratching for a living from barren soil on a storm-swept coast, Ruth remembered those foraging pigs. She dug a basketful of clams, boiled them in milk and set the dish before her husband, who said she must have been touched in the head to think of serving such fare.

"Better to die of the eating than the starving," said Ruth. They ate and survived.

The scallop boom came during another decline in the clam industry.

One morning in 1955, Bob White put-putted out to the north end of Clark's Island and dropped the hook. Exactly 55 minutes later he returned with his quota of 4 bushels of bay scallops which a New Bedford dealer checked to make sure did not contain too many mussels (which, by the way, make tasty morsels) or too much seaweed.

Bob's brief expedition was eloquent proof of the sudden and joyful abundance of the prized bivalves on over 300 acres of mud flats lining Duxbury harbor, all within easy reach of a long-handled rake.

On this particular December day, the price of a bushel of scallops in shell was \$4.75, with higher prices in prospect because of the scarcity of scallops around the Cape, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. Bob White, his 2 brothers and their father – Captain Norman White of the Duxbury Yacht Club all descended from sea captains – could earn as much as \$53 a week on a 3-hour working day during the boom. It was like finding a cluster of gold nuggets in one pile.

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The Scallop Rush gave the *Clipper* an exclusive story. It noted that the unexpected bonanza worked wonders in the boom-bust economy of a town whose population dwindles during the winter.

The 6-month scallop season had opened on October 1 when word got around town that there was "sea gold" out on the flats by Clark's Island (named for the first mate of the *Mayflower*, John Clark). Suddenly the mud flats were populated with shellfisherman.

Scallops were not new to Duxbury. Towards the end of the past century they were so plentiful they were used as fertilizer on Duxbury's inland farms. Old timers we interviewed recalled years when they went "guzzling," a term that refers to scooping scallops from mud flats of tidal inlets or guzzles. But few scallops had been found since the bitterly cold winter of 1934-35 when children skated out to the main channel of Clark's Island. It was not until 1953-54 that the scallop population was impressive.

The sudden abundance was ascribed to the progressive warming of ocean water which brought the scallops above the Cape. By mid-November of 1954, Duxbury had the biggest catch of bay scallops ever known north of Cape Cod. Meanwhile, down the Greater New Bedford area, there was an abrupt scallop famine.

The fever rose slowly in Duxbury. Few thought local scallops would challenge the established supremacy of the market. They blinked when Duxbury became the scallop capital of New England.

Cape and New Bedford dealers flocked into town to buy every bushel Duxbury could produce. When the price rose to almost \$5 a bushel, 81-year-old Maurice Chandler of Washington Street shook his head. "To think," he said, "that back in 1895 I sold 900 big lobsters it took me a week to trap for 6¢ each."

By mid-December, more than 12,000 bushels had netted Duxbury residents about \$50,000 in fresh currency, most of it going to those who needed it.

"This beats raising chickens," a farmer said. "You don't have to coop or feed scallops or worry about raccoons, and they sell for more a pound." Right. Shucked scallops were sold for \$1.25 a pound, and if you were as expert as Bob White's brother, Joel, you could shuck out a bushel in 40 minutes.

Duxbury was unprepared for the boom. None of the stores had scallop rakes, and an investigation revealed there was no such thing as a standard scallop rake. Each community had its own peculiar way of capturing scallops, whether by dragging, dredging (pronounced "drudgin" by old salts), scoop, nets or rakes. Duxbury improvised its own rakes, which varied in width from 7 inches to 20. Hardware stores sold every last shovel, pitchfork and rake. Coke rakes, normally used to remove clinkers from furnaces, were easier to fashion into scallop snatchers than some of the others, but they still needed long handles. A merchant came up with the solution – closet poles.

"I sold more closet poles in one week than I ever had previously in 2 years," said Ben Goodrich, Jr.

Dick Prince did a flourishing business at the Duxbury Garage making rakes, which he sold for \$12. Vernon Stewart interrupted a repair job on the town's modern steam roller to make the rakes, when Prince was unable to keep up with the demand. After all, Dick had to go scalloping, too!

Business boomed all over town. Never in an off season did marine appliance stores have such a run on new and used boats, outboard motors, caulking cements, oars, anchors and life jackets. It was the same story in other stores, with a heavy sale of hip boots, oilskins, heavy shirts, and foul-weather gear. Stan Roberts, who had bought Shiff's Store, struggled to meet the demand for long underwear, and he advertised "Scalloper Mittens" in the *Clipper*. One afternoon when Stan was out scalloping, a friend in a nearby boat called over: "I tried to get a pair of those mittens you advertised, but you were closed yesterday. Don't you want any more business?"

"How about you?" Stan asked. "I asked you a week ago to fix the leak on my porch, and like the rest of the carpenters, you were out scalloping."

Automobile mechanics, insurance agents, lawyers, teachers, realtors, airline pilots, firemen and policemen, joined the low-tide scallop fleet. Some quit their jobs to earn twice as much money doing 3 times less work. In the display window of Carl Santheson's Snug Harbor

Fish Market was the sign: *Open at High Tide*.

Overhead? All you needed was a \$2.50 commercial permit, 4 burlap bags, a rake and warm gear.

The *Clipper* was primarily interested in the boom's impact on the local economy. (We were too lazy to go out with the fleet.) What happened? For one shut-in, it meant a yearned-for television set. Persons who hadn't traded a car for years bought the latest models. They paid old bills. A carpenter, giving his physician \$115 in cash, said: "You know, Doc, you delivered my daughter just about 3 years ago; it's time I delivered payment."

Families paid their back taxes and water bills, caught up with mortgage payments and opened savings accounts for the first time since they were married. One family decorated its Christmas tree with scallop shells; others used crushed shells to make unique driveways. The names on the welfare roll dropped, and accounts receivable, including the *Clipper's*, dwindled.

The busiest person in town was Henry McNeil, a former professional boxer who, in addition to his duties as shellfish constable, was the town's burial agent and director of veterans' services. He was also a member of the police and fire departments and chief registrar for the draft.

One blustery November morning, several scallopers almost drowned when a squall hit a fleet of 70 small boats, swamping and capsizing some, sinking others. 3 men were taken ashore exhausted after clinging to their capsized boat for an hour. One man lost 8 bushels of scallops when his boat went down, and Henry McNeil caught up with 3 youngsters as their tiny craft, weighted with scallops, was shipping water.

Duxbury shellfishermen, unaccustomed to scalloping, knew little about shucking the bivalves, never having seen them in such commercial quantities. Most of them, therefore, shipped the scallops to New Bedford to be shucked, a job requiring considerable skill.

One resident who did his own shucking was Daniel Winsor, proprietor of the Winsor House, a charming inn with the appointments of a refined English pub. The Winsor House, a landmark since 1800, has a warm, friendly and dignified atmosphere. Its ancient pine-paneled, heavy-timbered dining room with its hand-hewn beams – its taproom with its Currier & Ives prints, open fireplace, candle sconces and massive tavern tables – make it unique. Dan Winsor, who is descended from a long line of sea captains who brought in cargo from China and the South Seas, raked in scallops, shucked them and served them to guests. From mud flat to dinner plate – a good example of vertical combination.

Meanwhile, *The Duxbury Clipper*, in its description of the short, unhappy life of the scallop, warned local shellfisherman not to be too optimistic:

If we have a severe winter with anchor frost like the one in 1934-35, expect few scallops next year. Among the deadly enemies of the scallop are oyster drills, starfish, ducks that gobble up spat, and parasites that bind adult scallop shells. Barring a bitter winter, and unless high winds strip seedling scallops from their stones, shell and eel grass moorings, more money may flow into the till next year.

After one more prosperous year, the restless scallop revisited former haunts, and the shellfishermen of Duxbury went to more prosaic pursuits.